

Remarks at a Breakfast With Religious Leaders September 8, 1995

Thank you very much, and welcome to the White House. I thank the Vice President for his wonderful introduction. I earnestly hope someday he won't have to close his eye when he reads the—[laughter]. Thank you. I cannot tell you all the wonderful contributions he's made to our country and to me and my family, but I can say that when my term in this job is over, one of the things that I will get credit for, even among people who disagree with nearly everything I do, is that I made a good decision when I picked a Vice President, and he then became clearly the most influential person ever to be in the Vice President's office in the history of this—[applause].

I have come to very much look forward to this breakfast. As I think most of you know, this is the third such breakfast we have had with leaders of faith from all walks of life, from all over our country, at about this time when we come back from vacation, our children go back to school, and we here in Washington have to go back to work. That itself is an act of faith sometimes. [Laughter] And a lot of you know that I have been very interested in the role of faith in public life and in the life of public persons for many years, since long before I became President.

Two years ago, I spoke about the profound impact on me of Stephen Carter's book, "The Culture of Disbelief," and I don't know whether Mr. Carter's forgiven me or not, yet. It's changed his life a little bit anyway since we talked about that. But Carter made an important point, that we simply, in this, the most religious of all countries and a country that in our Constitution protects the right of everyone to believe or not as he or she sees fit, we have to make room for something that important in the public square. And we have to do it in a way that recognizes that most American of rights, the right to differ.

After that experience I had reading the book and then having this breakfast and working on all this, we redoubled our efforts in this administration on the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and on implementing and on its implications and on trying to live up to the spirit as well as the letter of the law in many ways that a

lot of you are familiar with. And that is also what led me to give the speech I gave about the role of religion in education at James Madison High School in Virginia a few months ago, and then, following up on that, to have the Secretary of Education Dick Riley issue the guidelines that were just going out to all of our schools on the relationship of religion and public schools.

That was a very important thing for a lot of our schoolchildren and educators around this country and for a lot of people in this room and those whom you represent. We made it clear that under our law, schools are not religion-free zones; we simply, under the Constitution, prohibit the power of Government through the schools to advance particular religious beliefs. But students can still pray individually or together, silently or aloud. Religious clubs have a right to meet, just like any other clubs, and to do what they wish to do. Flyers can be distributed. Homework and other assignments can even be used to express religious convictions by students. Religion can be a part of the curriculum of public education as long as particular views are not advocated.

I think this is a very important thing. There are those who say that they think more should be done, and I think that part of it is they feel that, unless our young people, particularly those who may not be subject to religious influences, understand the basic values behind the great religions that our country permits to flourish and encourages to flourish, they might not grow up to be the kind of citizens they ought to be. So we've also done a lot of work on what has popularly been called character education in our country, trying to emphasize to our schools and to encourage them to teach the basic values of good citizenship, values that make a good life.

Secretary Riley has been extremely supportive and a strong advocate of what he calls the moral code that holds us together. In teaching that in our schools, teaching our students to be honest and trustworthy, reliable, to have respect for themselves, for others, for property, and for our natural environment, to be good citizens, and also to do the things that I advocated a

few months ago when I spoke at my alma mater, Georgetown University, to treat one another with civility and tolerance and to exercise personal responsibility. After all, if we all did what we were supposed to, we wouldn't have to spend so much time talking to other people—[laughter]—and neither would anybody else.

And this character education movement, I predict to you, will do quite well in this country. There will be more and more and more deliberate efforts to teach these values in our public schools. There is evidence already that in the schools that have a thoroughgoing, comprehensive, disciplined commitment to this, the drop-out rate is down, and the student performance is up. That's because you basically can't live without values. You've got some. It's just a question of what they are. And it's important to be explicit about them, and you can do that within the framework of the first amendment.

So if any of you are more interested in that, we can get you the information on what the Department of Education is doing. I just announced in California a couple of days ago that we have actually put out modest grants to four States to help school districts in those States develop comprehensive character education programs.

Let me say, the freshest evidence that this is important is a recent study, a very, very large study of young people and drug use that Joe Califano brought to my attention about 3 weeks ago that said that the three major determinants in whether young people use drugs or not was whether they had a strong relationship with their parents, whether they tended to believe in the future and be optimistic about it, and whether they had a connection to a church. Those three things were the three repeating constants in what is otherwise an incredible kaleidoscope of different life circumstances that lead young people either to use drugs or to refrain from using them. So I think that is important.

The Vice President talked about the night we had—I might say, it made a special night for us because he and I went to Baltimore with his son and my daughter, and each of them brought a friend. So we got to see this great event through the eyes of children. And the thing that struck me about it was that everybody was so happy and nobody resented Mr. Ripken's success. Not a person. I don't think a person in the country. Why? Because it was about more than talent, success, and making several million

dollars a year. It was about showing up for work every day—[laughter]—and sticking with your team. It wasn't about who got the best contract, who made the best deal. It was about keeping your end of the bargain.

And I think one of the reasons that people were so ecstatic about it is that it was an exceptional example of what most people try to do in their own lives every day. When I got home from California the night the record was tied, it was about midnight. And before I went to bed—I don't know about you, but when I get off an airplane and come in the house, I can't just plop down and go to sleep. So I turned on the television, and I saw the late local news. And there was a feature on the local news in Virginia of a bus driver who had not missed a day's work in 18 years. And here was this bus driver, he never would have been on television before, and they were doing a feature on him.

And the local reporter was riding a bus with him. And he was meeting the people that he picked up every day and let off every day and talking about how his daddy told him he was supposed to work, that he didn't think there was anything unusual. Why? Why wouldn't you go 18 years and never miss a day's work? And I thought, that man would have never been on television if it hadn't been for Cal Ripken breaking Lou Gehrig's record. There was a reaffirmation of the idea of responsibility, personal responsibility, the dignity of work, the devotion—that guy's team were the people that carry the folks around every day. Pretty important team. And I think it sort of reinforced to me this idea that in spite of all the differences in this country, there really are a lot of things that bind us together, that we believe very deeply.

I appreciate what the Vice President said about the First Lady. I wish she could be here today. She's getting home sometime tonight. But I think that that speech she gave resonated so powerfully across the world because it was elemental, basic, true, profound in the simplicity of the things that we all know, things that we all know we should do, things we all know we shouldn't do and shouldn't permit if we can stop. And it was a very powerful thing because it brought people together.

Now, I think that's very important today in America because of the kind of things that are going on. And I just want to talk very briefly

about that and the work we're about to undertake here.

In many ways, the big trends in America look good. Economically we have 7 million more jobs, 2½ million more homeowners. We're creating new businesses at a rate of 750,000 a year, by far the highest rate in American history. We have low inflation, high growth. By any standard, this is about the best combined economic picture in 20 years. African-American unemployment rate below 10 percent for the first time since the Vietnam war. A lot of the social indicators are encouraging. In almost every major city in America, the crime rate is down, the welfare rolls are down, the food stamp rolls are down.

A lot of the cultural things are encouraging. The divorce rate is down. The abortion rate is down. There are signs that people are beginning to get together even in troubled places. The United States has been honored to be a force for peace in the last 3 years in Northern Ireland and South Africa and the Middle East, in Haiti. We even see signs of hope in Bosnia. Today representatives of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia are meeting as a part of the peace initiative the United States has pushed so hard in Europe, and we pray for their success. They need to quit killing each other; it's not that much land involved. And there is nothing in their different religious faiths that dictates that kind of bloodletting.

So there is a lot to be hopeful about, a lot of common ground to celebrate. But if you look at it, you'd never know that to listen to what we do here. And I think there is a reason for that—there are two reasons for that. One is the culture around here and the way we do business or the way it's been done for years—I haven't been here too long, but I'm still learning about it—and the larger reasons of what's going on in the world today.

But let me deal with the basic, fundamental issues here. What worked for the bus driver and for Cal Ripken? Showing up for work, having the right attitude, working on the team, working for tomorrow, that's what works. What works in a church? Working together, working for the future around shared values. What works in a family? What works at a business? Not surprisingly, people don't like what they see in Washington if they don't see people working together and working for the future, if all they ever see is what are they fighting about today?

What is the new partisan difference that is all of a sudden all the rage?

I think we all have a common interest in balancing the budget, and I'm glad to see both parties' leadership now committed to doing that. For 2 years, we had a lonely battle here. We took the deficit from \$290 billion down to \$160 billion. It was a one-party operation. And when that happens, you have to make decisions that in the details are so controversial, it's unsettling to people. When both parties work together, they can do it better. So I think it's great; we're going to balance the budget.

Then the question is how should we do it, because it's not just a matter of debits and credits, it's also a matter of values and responsibilities. How you do this defines who you are. And I would argue to you that this is a much more important process today than it would have been a generation ago for reasons I will explain in just a moment.

But if you believe that, then we have to ask: What are the values? How are we going to provide for our children's future, especially for their education? What do we owe the elderly in this country in terms of health care? Seventy-five percent of the people who are eligible for Medicare live on \$24,000 a year or less. What do we owe to them? What do we owe to people like those veterans of World War II that we honored in Hawaii just a few days ago, who literally made the world that we are all living off of now, who set in motion the circumstances that permitted all of us in the age groups represented here to flourish? What do we owe to the poor and to the homeless?

What do we owe? How do our obligations here—can they be fulfilled, anyway? What kind of Government do we have to have to make this stuff work? Yesterday, the Vice President announced his 2-year report on our reinventing Government project. There are 160,000 fewer people working for the Government now than were when I became President. About 400 programs have been eliminated, many thousands of pages of regulations have been scrapped. But we've also worked very hard on improving the quality of Government.

Business Week magazine evaluated all the business units in America that depend heavily on being successful on the phone, great companies like L.L. Bean and Federal Express. And they said that the Federal Government Social Security Administration had the most effective,

information-laden, courteous phone service of any major organization in America, which I thought was a remarkable thing, because we're in pretty high cotton there with those other companies. [Laughter]

But what do we owe to the country in terms of the kind of Government we have and the way it performs? What are our obligations and responsibilities? How do all these compare with tax cuts that have been proposed? What do those tax cuts reflect in terms of our values? There are many different proposals, and they're all different. What do we get out of a balanced budget? I'll tell you. We get the opportunity to lift the burden of debt off of our children and grandchildren. We get lower interest rates. We free up the money that's available to be borrowed by people in the private sector to create new jobs. We get more growth if we do it right.

But if we're penny-wise and pound-foolish, if we don't think about our larger values, if we don't also take care of educating our people and lifting up our children, even the poorest of them, then we could wind up with a budget that doesn't do all of those things. Prosperity really has to grow out of having good, shared values. We're lucky; we're big; we're diverse; we've got a lot of resources. But we still have to do the right things.

If you look at the gentleman who was a bus driver, God gave him a good constitution. But a lot of healthy people don't show up for work every day for 18 years. Mr. Ripken is 6'4" and weighs 220 pounds, and not many people have a body like that. But there are a lot of people with bodies like that, that miss a lot of baseball games because they don't take care of it. They don't always do the right things.

So we have to do the right things. And that's very important. And it can't just be a mechanical thing. It can't just be a political thing. It can't be just who's got the political power and who's got the influence to get this or that deal done. This is an historic obligation we have. And we have to do it in a way that reflects common sense and that reaches common ground that's higher ground. That's what I've tried to say when I talked about the New Covenant in the last 3 years. It's not just a matter of contracts and deals. This is a—we're going through a period of great change. And we have to reach deep down inside for the right things to do that will bring us together.

Let me say that I—if ever there was a case of preaching to the saved, that's what I'm doing today. [Laughter] In more ways than one. A lot of you are involved in ministries that do this. You not only build the edifice of your churches, you serve the needs of your people. And that's what we have to do in America. And we cannot allow the usual partisan, divisive atmosphere which characterizes our national politics and which does make, frankly—to defend all the players here, many of whom have been here a lot longer than I have in Washington—they think that having these kind of differences and articulate them in a way that's most favorable to their constituents is the only way to communicate them across the vast distance that exists from Washington, DC, into the homes of the nearly 260 million Americans who live here, because it's not like being the pastor of a church or the Governor of a small State or the mayor of a city. They are so far from where their folks are, the way of doing things here tends to put a greater premium on words than deeds, a greater premium on positioning and division than production and teamwork and accomplishment. But that doesn't make it right. And it doesn't make it acceptable for this time.

So I'm trying to bring a new spirit here. I'm trying to deal with a lot of hot-button issues that need to be dealt with in the right spirit.

The welfare system needs to be reformed because the people that are on welfare hate it. Nobody wants to be dependent. So we should end welfare as we know it, but we ought to be mindful of the fact that we're doing it because our country will be better off if people are successful workers and successful parents. We don't need a permanently dependent system.

I'm trying to deal with the issue of crime in a responsible way that punishes criminals more but also seeks to prevent crime by giving our young people some things that they can say yes to as well as say no to.

We're trying to deal with the issue of immigration in a way that says that it's wrong for people to immigrate here illegally. They may need to do it. It may be a good thing for their family, but from our point of view, since we've got folks lined up willing to wait for years, we have to try to enforce the immigration laws and control our borders and be disciplined about this. And when we look at the volume of legal immigration, we have to look at it in terms

of our ability to maintain a decent standard of living for our own people and to imagine what it's going to be like over a 10-year period. But I think to try to blame immigrants for our problems is a mistake. We're all a nation of immigrants. Nearly everybody came from somewhere else.

And of course, you all pretty well know what I think about the affirmative action issue. There are some problems in the way these programs have been implemented. They ought to be fixed. There are some of them that don't work right, and they ought to be fixed. And nobody has a stake in America in promoting reverse discrimination or quotas or giving somebody something they're not qualified to receive.

But we should make a conscious effort to include all Americans in the bounty of America. Conscious effort is not the same thing as giving preference to unqualified people. A conscious effort is animated by the belief that God put within everybody the capacity to rise to higher levels, and we need everybody to become what we ought to be. So let's fix what doesn't work. But let's don't pretend that it's a bad thing to try to get the most out of everybody and to make effort. That's what I believe.

Let me tell you why I think this is all more important now than it is normally. Two years ago, I recommended a book by a nonreligious leader, Stephen Carter. Today I'll recommend another one. I've been reading this. This is a fascinating book by a man named Benjamin Barber, whom I had the privilege to know, called "Jihad Versus McWorld."

Now, let me tell you what the essential argument here is. Let me tell you why I believe it's important. Mr. Barber is arguing that democracy and the ability to hold people together and have reliable, predictable, good lives for people who work hard and do the right thing is being threatened today, first of all, by the globalization of the economy, which has a lot of benefits for those of us who have good educations and can benefit from it, with the movement of money and technology all across the world. But it's elevating consumerism to even higher and higher levels and promoting short-term gains. You watch this money—we watch it every day, billions and trillions of dollars moving across the globe in the split of an eye just because of an event here, an event there, an event the other place. It's very hard in those conditions to preserve even in the wealthy, pow-

erful countries the conditions of stable, ordinary life.

Therefore, you see what happens in America. We have 7 million new jobs; we have all these things that are happening that are good, but most hourly wage earners are working harder for the same or less money than they were making 10 years ago. And a lot of people feel insecure in their jobs because the economy is changing so much and they have no confidence that if they lose the job they have they can get another one that is just as good or better.

So we're living in this global economy where there are a whole lot of winners. But a lot of people who think they do just what Cal Ripken and the Virginia bus driver do think they may still lose, and that's a big problem for America. If people think they're willing to show up every day, they're working hard, they're doing right by their kids, they wouldn't break the law, they wouldn't cheat the Government out of a nickel on their taxes, they wouldn't begin to do anything wrong, and they still may not make it, that's a problem for America.

The other word, "jihad," as you know, refers to holy war, the Arabic concept—Muslim concept of the holy war. It's not an anti-Muslim book, by the way. Islam is a beautiful religion with great values. What it refers to is, as people face a world that they cannot control, when they think that democracy is not going to work for them, that they can't keep the family of the United States or the family of France or Germany or Russia or Estonia or you name it, together, they are vulnerable—because their nerves are raw and they have no sense of certainty—to extreme manifestations of people who claim to have revealed truth, so that the likelihood of having more conflicts rooted in ethnic, racial, or religious differences increases perversely as the world becomes more economically integrated. And he argues, I believe correctly, that it is even more important today for the United States of America to succeed, even more important today for democracy to work, even more important today for the basic values that we just talked about to be able to be made real in the lives of ordinary citizens.

And that's why what we're doing with this budget debate is so important and why we have to do it right. If we don't balance the budget, we're going to hurt America's future. If we do it in the wrong way, we're going to hurt America's future.

About once in 100 years this sort of thing happens. We are going through a level of change in the way we work and live that is comparable to the change we went through when we moved from being an agrarian society to an industrial, more urbanized society. And it took our country from roughly the end of the 1890's until about 1916 to sort through all that. I mean, it's a continuing process. But we basically had to decide what is the responsibility that we have as a country? What does the Government have to do? How will we deal with this?

Now we're moving out of that age to a more information-based, technology-based age. We're moving from the cold war to the global economy. We're moving from the possibility of nuclear war between superpowers to the possibility that terrorists can carry around biological weapons that kill people in Japanese subways or make homemade bombs that blow up the World Trade Center or the Federal building in Oklahoma.

Believe me, it's better that we don't have to worry as much about everybody being wiped out. Let's not kid ourselves. But it's important to realize that our great country, this family of America, has forces beyond it economically that are pulling at our ability to hold everybody together, and in reaction to the insecurity that is caused and the uncertainty that is caused, there are forces internally in every great democracy forcing people to be divided among themselves. That's why I said the other day, do we have to fix welfare? Yes. Affirmative action? Yes. Immigration problems? Yes. Is that the cause of the anxiety of the middle class in America? No, not really. That's not the real cause. That's not an excuse not to fix them; we do. But we need to know what the real cause is.

And when you're living in a time like this when people are torn from pillar to post, having those basic values to fall back on, knowing that there is a church with a larger ministry is important. But also be humbled enough to know that in a time like this, when you're moving into a future you can't fully predict, nobody has all the answers, that's important, too.

I don't want to embarrass him, but not very long ago, I was home in Arkansas, and my pastor, Rex Horne, who's here, gave a fascinating sermon in which he was talking about how Jesus treated different kinds of people. And he pointed out how humble Christ was in dealing with

the leper, the hated Zaccheus, the woman caught in adultery. He reminded us of the stories of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan in the Bible. And then he said, you know, the only people Jesus was really hard on and acted like He was arrogant to—[laughter]—were the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the religious hypocrites who appeared to have all the revealed truth, and the people he ran out of the temple because they got church and state mixed up, too. They tried to take over the temple. [Laughter] Right?

Now, this is an important lesson, and it had a huge impact on me, on my level of humility. We all need a good dose of humility. This is—it is not given to any of us to fully understand the future, but we do know we're moving into a different time with no precedent. And Mr. Barber, he may not be right about everything, but he's got a fix on it, and it's worth thinking about. And I ask all of you to think about that and to think of your work—when you see the people in your churches and your synagogues, in your mosques, who have problems in their lives, ask yourselves, are these problems the kind of problems that would happen at any age in time, or are they aggravated by this different period of change through which we're going, and how can we move together to respond to it?

So I say to you, I hope you will pray for all of us here in these next 90 days, without regard to our party or our religion, because we have a hard and difficult job to do. We have to act. We have to succeed, but we have to do it in the right way for America to move into the next century with the American dream alive and well and with the ability to keep the kind of character and strength that we celebrated this week not only in the achievement of Cal Ripken but in the achievement of the bus driver and all the people that were cheering because they shared something that we desperately need to elevate and preserve as long as this country exists.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:33 a.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Joseph A. Califano, Jr., director, Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, Columbia University.